

Rescue and Righteous Among the Nations in Holland

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In his book *After the Destruction (Na de Ondergang, 1997)*, the young Dutch researcher Ido de Haan noted that the number of Dutch Righteous Among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem is relatively high when compared with other countries. In one particular sentence, the author reveals his lack of knowledge on the topic of the Righteous in general, and on the Netherlands in particular. He seems to assume that some kind of cap has been set for the number of people deserving of this honor in each country, and that Holland's limit is unusually high.

This kind of mistake in understanding the Righteous Among the Nations is a good starting point for explaining Yad Vashem's policies on the subject. Recognizing a person or a group of people as Righteous Among the Nations is reliant upon one or more survivors requesting that the Jewish people honor their rescuers. There are also, of course, special cases where people are recognized as Righteous as a result of objective documentation, such as Raul Wallenberg.

The Dutch author questions how, when so many more Jews were murdered in the Netherlands relative to other western European countries (close to 80%, as opposed to Belgium and Norway, 44%, and France, 24%), so many Dutch have been honored by Yad Vashem. Shouldn't one assume the opposite – that the Dutch did not help their fellow Jews as much as Belgian or French citizens? However, the explanation is exactly the opposite and is based on two facts: the extremely cruel nature of the wartime persecution of Jews in the Netherlands, and the protracted reign of its occupying regime.

The German decision to exterminate all of European Jewry was made at the highest levels – by Hitler himself – around mid-December 1941. However, its implementation across the countries of occupied Europe was neither simultaneous nor equal. Its accomplishment was reliant on different factors, first and foremost on the leadership of the German regimes in each individual country, as well as their particular wartime conditions. Another important fact was the attitude of the local population towards the Jews. In three aspects of the persecution – range, speed and manner – Holland was exceptional in many ways.

Immediately after the occupation of the Netherlands, Hitler decided, contrary to a previous agreement with the army, to establish a civilian occupation regime and not a military one, such as in France and Belgium. This decision was probably made in response to the flight of Queen Wilhelmina to England with all the members of her government, a move that had left Holland without a ruling body. This constitutional void was used by Hitler as a golden opportunity to institute a regime of officials, as opposed to generals, which led to many ongoing difficulties for Holland and its Jewish residents.

A civilian regime in an occupied country generally places more of a burden on its citizens than on its military, and in the Netherlands the ruling bodies were especially severe on any subject relating to Jews: the regime's leadership was renowned for its harsh Jewish persecution. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, former Prime Minister of Austria who had warmly welcomed the Anschluss, was appointed *Reichskommissar* –

governor. Seyss-Inquart, a member of the Nazi Party, placed two of his allies, Dr. Wimmer and Dr. Fischboeck – Austrians and zealous antisemites like himself – in positions of high authority. In addition, Himmler appointed a high-ranking SS officer, Hanns Rauter, as head of security in the Netherlands. Rauter was also appointed chief of the Dutch police, even though the police were officially subordinate to the Dutch interior ministry. Rauter had “excelled” in his harsh treatment of the Jews as early as 1938, during *Kristallnacht*. The rest of the Nazi leadership in Holland had also participated in anti-Jewish acts within the Austrian government, and all felt an intense hatred for Jews in accordance with traditional Austrian antisemitism. The members of the Austrian-German leadership were efficient, intelligent and well experienced in administration and politics. They had succeeded in plundering Austrian Jewish property and expelling the Jews in just half a year, from March to November 1938, far more quickly than the five years it had taken the Germans.

Within a few months, Seyss-Inquart’s police force had expelled every Dutch Jew from public office. From the beginning of 1941 the Jews were officially registered, and all Jewish businesses shrewdly liquidated and handed over to German companies and their Dutch sympathizers. Unwilling to resist the tough German leadership in its determination to solve “the Jewish problem” speedily and completely, the Dutch state authorities thus abandoned their fellow Jewish nationals – who had enjoyed 150 years of full citizenship rights – to German antisemitism. And when the deportations to the death camps began, the German regime in Holland cooperated with Eichmann and his men in the most efficient and obedient manner.

How did these unique circumstances affect the matter of Righteous Among the Nations in the Netherlands? The character of the German regime and its tremendous efficiency made it more dangerous to rescue Jews in Holland than in Belgium or France. Anyone caught helping Jews in the latter countries would suffer a relatively mild punishment, but in Holland he or she was likely to be executed or sent to a concentration camp, where the chances of survival were very slim. The German and Dutch police conducted searches for hidden Jews and gave informants a sum of money for every Jew caught with their help. The German police also enticed Jews to leave their hiding places with false promises to save them from deportation.

At first, the anti-Jewish policies of the occupying regime did not encounter much resistance from the Dutch public. It is true that the February 1941 strike in Amsterdam and other nearby towns turned in to a mass rally against the cruel arrests of more than 400 Jews. But the wave of protest and identification with the Jews soon died out and in fact worked against them: the strike led to a feeling of complacency among the Jewish leadership and a tougher stand by the German leadership against the Jews. Moreover, the same groups of workers who had demonstrated in February 1941 were found willing the following summer to assist in the deportations of the Jews – transporting them from their homes to transit sites onto local busses and trains, and from there to the death camps.

What the Jews needed at that fateful hour was not mass protests, but the opportunity to avoid arrest by the German and Dutch police forces. Their chances of survival depended on the willingness of non-Jews to hide them in their apartments, provide them with identity cards and ration books, and accompany them to other places of refuge. In the summer of 1942, the Dutch public was, in the main, unwilling to lend

this kind of assistance: this was due both to a general apathy towards the Jews, as well as to the fact that the total German control of the media meant they were not yet aware of their fate.

Nevertheless, initial signs of spontaneous aid to the Jews occurred just days before the first transport from Amsterdam to the Westerbork transit camp. Cor Basiaanse, a young woman from the town of Utrecht, traveled to Amsterdam, collected a number of children from her parents' home and brought them back to Utrecht, where she hid them among a number of families. Four organizations specializing in the rescue of children soon emerged: a group of students from Utrecht, a group of students from Amsterdam, a Christian organization called "Friends International," and a group of devout Christians connected to an underground newspaper. Together these four groups saved some 1,100 Jews, some 90% of which were Jewish children hiding across the country.

Significantly, the students from Utrecht received support from the archdiocese of Holland, J. de Jong, residing in the city. Not only did he allow them to use his safe for storing documents, he also gave them financial aid and requested that Dutch bishops contribute towards the holy cause of saving Jews. This was extremely important. The archdiocese had objected to the Nationalist–Socialist movement since the 1930s, forbidding Catholic believers to join. This resolved stand of the religious leader influenced his subordinates, and many Jews were hidden in areas inhabited almost exclusively by Catholics. In one case, a Catholic priest in a small village was executed for saving Jews.

This clear stand against the German regime was not unique. During the occupation, Dutch state officials lost their national standing, causing Christians – Catholic and Protestant alike – to look towards their religious authorities for guidance, especially in the matter of saving Jews. More than a few priests stood by their moral values despite the German terror. The priest B. J. Ader from a northwestern town in Holland traveled to the Jewish hospital in Amsterdam, where he pressured the doctors and nurses working there to come with him into hiding. He was even prepared to find them refuge among his own community, and created a branched network of rescuers operated by his daughter. He was eventually arrested and executed. Another priest, L. Overduin from the town of Enschede established a branched network of helpers together with members of the local Jewish council and, with the support of Jewish and non-Jewish industrialists, found many places of refuge, mostly in the east of the country.

The religious authorities were a decisive influence in many cases, especially in the villages and small towns where residents of the homogeneous Catholic communities were generally aware that certain families were hiding Jews. Their religious and social unity prevented informing to the official authorities, a widespread phenomenon in the larger cities. One example of this was the town of Nieuwlande in the east of the country. A local resident, Arnold Douwes, together with a young Jew called Max Leons, organized the transport of Jews from the west, where they found refuge among some 200 families.

The south of Holland was liberated in September 1944 but the north remained under German military rule until 5 May 1945. The persecution of Jews in the unliberated

areas thus continued much later than in other countries. The danger that informers would reveal their whereabouts was high, and many places of refuge became unsuitable as German soldiers were billeted in those homes. Most of the hidden Jews were forced to change their hiding places, sometimes dozens of times. One rescue organization was forced to find on average four different places for each of the 250 children in its charge. Under the ever-increasing danger, the circle of rescuers thus widened greatly, and a large network became necessary for moving Jews from place to place. Towards the end of the war, the police apparatus, together with the Dutch collaborators increased their efforts to catch Jews as well as political dissidents – a group whose numbers grew steadily as Germany's defeat approached. In April-May 1943, the great strikes began, including the train system and the students who refused to sign a commitment to keep away from anti-German activities. The number of those in hiding thus grew quickly, soon reaching 300,000. Less than 10% were Jews, some 25,000 people. Those who had previously refused to take in Jews at last began to open their doors. However, places of refuge were not always enough; Jews also desperately needed forged identity papers and ration cards, and food was becoming extremely scarce. The underground was also constantly seeking ways to confound the German authorities, which held a lot of information about the Jews, including their addresses.

From 1941, every Jewish identity card had been clearly stamped with the letter "J." Members of the underground attempted meticulously to remove the "J" without leaving any remnant. This was difficult work and could not be carried out on a widespread basis. Over time a new method was introduced: forging identity and other papers such as ration cards. This also required great skill, as well as special tools and a specific kind of paper. Despite these difficulties, underground groups succeeded in creating tens of thousands of these forged documents, not just for Jews but also for underground activists and people who refused to work as slave laborers in Germany. German and Dutch officials attempted to destroy this illegal activity, cunningly distributing new ration cards. But the underground adapted, and managed to create a great number of new forged cards. It also stole numerous certificates from citizen registry and rationing offices across the country.

The Westerweel group, a well-known underground group named for its charismatic leader, managed to save hundreds of young people. In August 1942, rumors that the German police were planning to arrest more than 50 young members of the "Aliyat Hanoar" youth group flooded the area. Answering a plea by the young *halutzim* (pioneers), Joop Westerweel and his companions found hiding places for all of them within a few days. From the beginning, the two groups – the Westerweel group and the *halutzim* – enjoyed a strong bond. The latter, a Jewish underground group headed by Shushu Simon and Menachem Pinkhof, worked tirelessly with the Westerweel group to bring some 150 *halutzim* from Holland to France. Their real aim was to get to *Eretz Israel*, and some 60 achieved this while the war still raged in Europe. At his departure from the first group at the foot of the Pyrenees, Joop Westerweel gave an emotional address in which he asked them not to forget their friends and those who had suffered under Nazi rule, and to safeguard the freedom of the new Jewish nation in *Eretz Israel*. Westerweel was arrested in March 1944 trying to help two young Jewish girls flee across the Belgian border. Despite cruel torture, he refused to reveal anything about the activities of the group. He was executed on 11 August 1944.

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The number of Dutch Jews killed during the Holocaust was larger than any other Western European country. The main reason for this was the zealous antisemitism of the occupying regime in the Netherlands. The heads of the Dutch state apparatus submitted to the requests and orders of the Germans, and persuaded the lower ranks to cooperate with them, despite its illegality under Dutch law. Opposition to the persecution developed spontaneously among individuals or small groups that could not accept the humiliation of the Jews and their deportation from the Netherlands. The rescuers acted out of humanitarian or religious motivations. Most important was the public protest of the head of the church against the anti-Jewish policies. This caused local religious leaders to extend a hand to Jews, and they encouraged their flocks to hide Jews in their homes. Aid to Jews endangered their lives more than in Belgium or France. Many paid for it with their lives or were sent to concentration camps in Germany.

The fear and hope that accompanied the Jews in hiding created many cases of strong bonds between rescuers and survivors. This fact is expressed by the moving way in which Yad Vashem has been approached to honor the rescuers as Righteous Among the Nations. Since the 1960s, when Yad Vashem began its mission to recognize the Righteous, the Dutch were well represented among the recipients of the honor. Many of the Jews who survived in the Netherlands immigrated to Israel and recognized Yad Vashem and its work at a time when the institution was still unfamiliar in Europe. This also contributes to the relatively large numbers of Dutch Righteous Among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem.

Dr. Joseph Michman researched Dutch Jewry and was a member of the Commission for the Designation of Righteous Among the Nations.